

The last word WNET censorship

by Edith Becker, Jane Gaines, Julia Lesage, Michelle Citron,
John Hess, B. Ruby Rich, Doug Eisenstark, Chuck Kleinhans,
Peter Steven

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WNET, the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) station in New York City, commissioned a panel of seven independent filmmakers to preview over 250 independent films for broadcast in the station's Independent Focus series, the only regular program in New York to show independent work. The panel selected 28 films, four of which the station, without any consultation with the panel members, refused to show. The four censored films were all radical ones, made from within ongoing political movements and expressing the points of view of oppressed groups. The films were THE CHICAGO MATERNITY CENTER STORY (1977, Kartemquin Films, an expose of the health care industry and its denial of maternity services to poor and working class women), A COMEDY IN SIX UNNATURAL ACTS (1975, Jan Oxenberg, a lesbian feminist comic satire), FINALLY GOT THE NEWS (1970, Stu Bird, Peter Gessner, and Rene Lichtman, a militant portrayal of a Detroit Marxist organization, mostly of Black auto workers, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers), and O POVO ORGANIZADO (1976, Robert Van Lierop, a documentary about the effort to establish socialism in Mozambique after the liberation in 1975).

Since then, in response to organized protest from New York's lesbian and gay community and the Committee to Make Public Television Public, WNET has shown A COMEDY IN SIX UNNATURAL ACTS. Probably the station had in mind a divide-and-conquer strategy by showing the lesbian film and not the others, but this has not happened. The organizing coalition understands that WNET's relenting and showing this film proves that public television is vulnerable to organized community pressure. The lesbian and gay communities nationwide clearly showed the effectiveness of demonstrations against WINDOWS and CRUISING, and both national press coverage of and individual

letters protesting WNET's censorship are now inspiring radical film and videomakers on a local level to organize to exert pressure on their PBS station to air previously tacitly censored radical work.

We are asking you to protest WNET's censorship of the three remaining films by writing to the stations management (we've included a sample letter below) While we have no particular illusions about trying to reform public TV as an end in itself or as sufficient to do real justice to oppressed people in the USA, we do see that at certain moments genuine contradictions, and thus possibilities for meaningful change, exist within certain institutions. WNET revealed openly public TV's decision-making process when it wouldn't go along with its own show of democracy, the peer review panel. WNET's act reveals public TV's elitist bias and ultimately the conservative and undemocratic nature of liberalism itself. We think that it is important to analyze and act upon such contradictions as part of an overall strategy for socialist revolution. Because of the contradictions that currently exist within public TV, we can formulate politically effective tactics to gain more innovative and culturally representative programming.

We must look at what happened at WNET in an historical and political context. For several years in New York, the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers (AIVF) had struggled to form a peer review panel to choose the independent films for the Independent Focus series. To get such a panel established at all meant a major breakthrough in public TV programming policy. Public TV stations have resisted submitting their programming to citizen review. AIVF hoped this peer review panel would serve as a model for the other 300 PBS stations.

Since the censorship of the four films, a joint community and independent media protest movement has been organized. This means that a new coalition of forces, potentially radical, has organized itself to "take on" public TV. Public television, which receives \$35 million a year in tax monies from Congress and which has access to the public airways (and even more so with the forthcoming satellite TV system), now faces organized pressure coming jointly from independent media workers united with community groups. These coalitions understand that to influence programming, they will also have to exert pressure on public TV's funding, hiring policies, and paths of access.

How has this come about? And what demands can be made on public TV, as opposed to commercial television? The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), the national entity that receives funds from Congress and distributes them to the stations that compose PBS, has a Congressional mandate to foster in its programs "excellence, creativity, diversity, and innovation." CPB claims in its own 1979 Program Fund Priorities statement that it will deliberately take up controversial issues and introduce more innovative and diverse programming so that it will

serve all Americans. It will build an audience rather than just serve the educated elite, the audience it already has.

But we all know the homogeneity, banality, flatness, and narrowness of format that plagues television in general, public as well as commercial TV. In 1978 Congress, reacting to the lack of diversity, talent, and new ideas in public TV programming, enacted the Public Telecommunications Act of 1978. This law directed the CPB to funnel a "substantial amount of funding" to "independent producers - something it has not done yet.

Independent film and videomakers (i.e., those small producers not usually employed or commissioned by TV stations, corporations, or other institutions) produce most of the really innovative, films and tapes we've seen. Many work closely with community groups, deal with social issues from an alternative point of view, and create media that actively promote radical social change. In ordinary TV programming, with its emphasis on either expensive "series" or so-called "objective" documentaries, we rarely find involved and passionate investigation of a group or movement's own history, culture, and social and political circumstances. Community-oriented media, however, often present a group's point of view and history for the first time to the group and to the rest of us. This is truly "independent" media production in that it represents an independent point of view.

While it is clear to us that an abundance of such media production exists, especially from Black, Hispanic, and gay producers, public TV consciously keeps it off the air. Congress is promoting "independent" production on public TV primarily to encourage "innovation, creativity, and diversity," low cost programming, and competition (part of the current effort to deregulate major industries, e.g., air lines, trucking, and mass communication). As radical media workers, we understand not only that our productions should be on TV but also that they are, in a way, exactly what Congress had in mind.

The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) did in the past substantially fund "independent" producers, for example, in 1973 41% of the CPB programming budget went to independents. But there were large outfits, such as the Children's Television Workshop, which makes a big part of its budget on toy sales (*Sesame Street*, etc.). When such "independents" stopped receiving CPB funds in 1976, CPB funding of independents slipped to a low of 5%. At this point the 1979 Public Telecommunications Act mandated that CPB substantially fund independents.

Of course, the definition of who's an independent and what percentage of the budget is substantial enough quickly became something to be fought over. Congress broadly outlines an independent producer as anyone "not affiliated with any organization, an individual who while

talented may not yet have received national recognition." Much more narrowly, CPB defines it as "anyone not exclusively employed by or under contract with a public broadcasting station." PBS stations, whose expensive productions rely heavily on CPB funding, do not want any money to go to independents directly. It is clear that if money is funneled through them, it will still go mainly for station productions, aimed at subsequent syndication in the PBS network, such as WGBH's *French Chef*, and WTTW-Chicago's *Sounds Stage*.

In reading the Congressional Committee transcripts, it is clear that Congress intended that CPB spend at least 50% of its programming budget on independent productions. But CPB was not required by law to set aside a specific amount. Also CPB was not mandated by law to decide between its "system priorities" and the quality, diversity, and innovation of program proposals. The PBS stations will desperately put pressure on CPB to heed "system priorities" and give out its "independent production" monies through them. Bob Thomas, Director of the Association of Public Broadcasting Stations of New York State, sent out a dommunique to managers of PBS stations. In it he blasts CPB's plans to fund independents in response to the 1978 law, calling it "alarming." If producers are small, Thomas writes, their work must be "doggy enough that nobody wants it." He said PBS must counter the efforts of independent producers who, with "energy and enthusiasm ... are seeking to dip into Public Broadcasting funds."

This condescending attitude lies behind (not very far) what happened at WNET with the Independent Focus series and what has happened with independent film and videomakers as they've tried to get their work on or funded by public TV, especially when the media maker is offering a product the contents of which reflect an independent point of view not shaped by "system priorities" or overwhelmingly commercial concerns. There are only a few PBS series in major cities that show independent work - *Image Union* in Chicago and *Independent Focus* in New York are examples. These are the only regular access noncommercial media workers have to television. Even so they are paid only a pittance (\$35 a minute for *Independent Focus*, although that series is then sold to other PBS stations nationwide) and film/video makers have to suffer TV "editing" of their work.

Similarly, the seven peer review panel members received only \$175 each for the demanding work of previewing 250 films. WNET never told the panelists why it rejected the four films or even that it had rejected them. The panelists only met with the series programmer when the panel began its work even though it would have been logical for the WNET programming executives to consult actively with the panel after its work was done. When the panel heard of the censorship, they wrote asking to see the standards used by the station to evaluate the films, since presumably these should apply to all of WNET's programming. But, of

course, no such written standards or guidelines exist. The competency and the authority of the peer review panel were treated contemptuously. And this action came from the administration of the most "progressive" program for independent filmmakers available on US public TV.

Such cavalier treatment of small producers hits minority film and videomakers the hardest. Exclusion from media employment and industry decision-making bodies, makes most of them independent by definition. In 1978, CPB funded its third Minorities Task Force Report, entitled "A Formula for Change." This report categorically stated,

"The informational, cultural, and educational opportunities which should flow from the taxpayer-supported Public Broadcasting System are so slight as to be insignificant insofar as minorities are concerned."

This report and others on the status of women found minorities and women and their concerns significantly absent in upper-level policy making, employment and training programs, audience research, production, and program content.

Since that report, CPB has set no goals for affirmative action, gathered no departmental statistics to check improvement, and set no timetables to realize goals. Among the goals proposed by the report was the modest one that CPB and the whole of PBS allocate funds equal to the percentage of minorities in the national population to be used for minority TV programming and other program development efforts. Presently minorities are presented mainly as stereotypes, which means cultural non-recognition, ridicule, and negation. Although there are 20 million Hispanics in the US with over 43% under 18 (and thus in greatest need of educational TV), and although the US Census Bureau projects that by 1985 Hispanics will be the US's largest minority population, only 1% of CPB programs have been Hispanics in the last 10 years. Right now programs aimed at minorities are children's programs (often funded by HEW, not CPB), cultural programs or representation on talk shows. Last fall, WTVS-Detroit cancelled their popular *Detroit Black Journal* and Boston's WGBH censored BLACKS BRITANNICA (see JC # 21). The social and economic component of Black, Hispanic, Asian-American and Native American life, their unemployment, poor housing, poor health care, and poor education, is never discussed from their perspective or in any meaningful way.

It is no accident that the films WNET has censored were all from the perspective of oppressed peoples and were either not understood for what they were doing (i.e., rejected on the basis of "poor quality," or ruling class taste) or were criticized for being narrow, dull, or outdated. In fact, public TV has a great desire to ghettoize a certain kind of input, to call it "special interest" rather than admit it is based on community demands. Thus a film on the economic development of Puerto Rico

made by a Puerto Rican or a video tape on racism made by a Black, which deal with issues of concern to all Americans, are labeled "special interest" and shunted aside because of that label.

When Jesus Treviño and Carlos Penichet asked the CPB Board to set aside \$2.5 million this year to fund a national series on/by/for Hispanics, several pilot projects, some research and development grants, and mechanisms to increase communication between CPB and Hispanic producers, one response from the Board was that "set asides" won't work. In fact, there may be a legal obligation for CPB "set asides" right now since the PBS stations are unwilling to fund independents. Past efforts to fund independents and minority TV have not worked out for minority producers because of the decision-making bias discussed above. The WNET Independent Documentary Fund has funded no Hispanic projects. The \$1 million CPB put into minority programming and a minority TV lab was spent with no provision for minority input into projects at their developmental stages and with no mechanism for getting information out to minority filmmakers. Only a notice in *Variety* tipped off independent filmmakers that the \$1 million Minority Fund existed. But information was not available from CPB, because by then all the information and the money was in the hands of the various station managers. Finally, AIVF sent out more information to independent filmmakers about the Minority Fund than did CPB.

This willfully inadequate solicitation process hurts minority and community based groups the most. But CPB has no present policy, clear procedures, or guidelines for disbursing program monies except to PBS and to well connected large producers. Beyond that, local stations systematically deny many of their communities significant programming. The PBS stations want to define their audience ideologically only as "individuals" and not in terms of political organizations or oppression.

How can CPB money get to independent film and videomakers and especially to minority groups? Clearly minority producers have to be on review panels, in at the planning stage of projects, and in creative control over projects directed to the concerns of minority men and women. CPB should set up peer review panels in each major program area to grant money directly to independents, and it should set up a standardized proposal review process with evaluation procedures and timetables. The AIVF and the Alternative Cinema Conference report on public TV recommend that such peer panels in their composition represent in percentages the ethnic, geographic, sexual, class, and age groupings in the US. The panels should be composed 50% of independent producers, 25% of public TV representatives, and 25% of community representation, with a 2/3 majority veto over the CPB Program Fund Director's decisions.

The CPB would maintain lists of independent film and videomakers from which to nominate individuals to peer panels, and CPB would then have an adequate mailing list or reference guide to independent film and video in the USA to use itself. Such panels and procedures would end the "need" CPB feels to fund only large series and not single programs and would end its need to fund independents through local stations (which funding doesn't happen now). Only direct funding of independents by CPB will satisfy Congress's demand for "substantial" representation of independents on public TV.

Peer review panels that include both independent filmmakers and a multiplicity of interest groups, especially community and labor groups, will guarantee diversity and innovation in programs as well as build a wider audience than public TV now has. Furthermore, such panels have the skills and knowledge to program series and evaluate quality, which the boards of directors and executives of CPB and PBS don't have. There's a tendency among PBS and CPB executives to say that this would be programming by decree, not by standards of creativity or quality. But we all know the degree of imitation and blandness on public TV now.

What we're arguing for is a real public representation in public TV - from programming to implementing the Minority Task Force report. Right now there are too many sections of the public not at all represented in any systematic and accountable way on public TV. Minimally, we should demand more work by truly independent producers, a broadening of the interests represented in programming, and more consistent adherence to peer review decisions about independent programming. Although these are simple democratic demands, they won't be met unless a broad mass of individuals and groups make them loudly, clearly, and insistently. Presently, CPB and PBS are vulnerable to attack and can be forced into a much more progressive policy.

It is with this background in mind that we ask you to put pressure on WNET to program the three films still censored. The right of viewers to see films from within social and political movements, the need for stations to accept the principle of peer selection of independents' work, the need for public TV to show even more independent work, and the need for community input into programming - these are the larger issues to struggle for. Independent media artists, minority communities, and radicals struggling for social change have the opportunity at this time to join together to form an effective coalition to put alternative media on public TV.

SAMPLE LETTER

President, WNET-Channel 13, 356 W. 58th Street, New York, NY 10019

Dear Mr. J. Iselin,

WNET's refusal to show O POVO ORGANIZADO, A COMEDY IN SIX UNNATURAL ACTS, FINALLY GOT THE NEWS, and THE CHICAGO MATERNITY CENTER STORY after they were selected for the Independent Focus series by a representative peer review panel is a clear case of censorship. Since WNET is a pace setting station for the rest of the country, I urge you to program the three films still censored as part of the series and to ensure that station management does not interfere with demonstrable public need for responsible programming.

Signed...

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